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MOVIE REVIEW

'Double Dare'

Two stuntwomen, generations apart, reveal the humor and drama of their craft in this warm documentary.

By Kevin Crust, Times Staff Writer

"Double Dare," a fascinating, highly entertaining documentary by filmmaker Amanda Micheli, features intertwining profiles of two stuntwomen representing different generations of what remains an unusual occupation for women. Just as men once acted women's parts in Shakespeare's day, it was common in Hollywood not long ago for stuntmen to don wigs and perform dangerous deeds in the stead of actresses.

Slowly (very slowly), women began to make inroads in the male-dominated profession, and women such as Jeannie Epper earned work as stunt performers. After working for nearly 20 years in television and features, Epper landed a signature role as Lynda Carter's stunt double on the superhero series "Wonder Woman." Twenty years later and a half a world away, a young Kiwi named Zoë Bell began doubling for Lucy Lawless performing the dangerous stunts of the title character in "Xena: Warrior Princess." The two women are very different at first glimpse but find common ground in their struggles in the business. The earthy matriarch of a family that Steven Spielberg calls "the Flying Wallendas of film," Epper, now in her early 60s and a grandmother, still performs falls, drives stunt cars and does stunt coordinating. After nearly 50 years in the game, however, she faces the continuing challenges of finding work in the youth-fixated culture of Hollywood. Bell on the other hand is still at the beginning of her career, a tough spitfire who's attractive and spirited enough to be a star in her own right. Yet moving to the U.S. from her native New Zealand after "Xena" wrapped is daunting for a woman in her 20s with limited contacts. The film brings

together the two women for a trip to the World Stunt Awards, a high-fall training session and auditions for the "Kill Bill" films. What for the briefest of moments has the awkward staginess of a reality TV show quickly transforms into a warm tale of mentoring and kinship as Bell vies to double for Uma Thurman.

Micheli interviews Quentin Tarantino, Spielberg, Lawless and Carter as well as various stunt world luminaries, painting a convincing portrait of the craft and business of professional stunts, and the unique obstacles women face. The director also deftly blends footage of the two women performing leaps, rolls and fights with the final scenes, as they played on television or film, revealing just how much magic is involved in the process. From the playful action-hero opening credits to Shonen Knife's frenetic cover of the Carpenters' "Top of the World" over the closing credits, the documentary mines the humor and drama of the women's lives and proves to be consistently enjoyable. Stunts are one of the more taken-for-granted aspects of filmmaking, and aside from the occasional pre-movie Calendar promo showing how a particular type of stunt is done or in the extras on a DVD, audiences generally don't get to see a lot of what stunt people do. And though it seems that that's the way it should be ~ looking behind the wizard's curtain or learning the magician's secrets can sometimes spoil the illusion ~ "Double Dare" might make you think otherwise, providing a welcome look at two integral performers whose faces are rarely seen and whose names normally appear buried in the end credits.

MPAA Rating: Unrated

Presented by Runaway Films and Goodmovies Entertainment, distributed by Balcony Releasing. Director-cinematographer Amanda Micheli. Producers Karen Johnson, Danielle Renfrew. Editor Purcell Carson. Music Marco D'Ambrosio. Sound Craig Burton. Running time: 1 hour, 21 minutes.